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Shirley Garick

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The Wise Leader

Dr. Shirley Garick
Texas A&M University- Texarkana

This paper is an article review of the Wise Leader, written by Nonaka, I; Takeuchi, H (2011) in the Harvard Business Review. These authors offer salient advice on what a wise leader needs to understand, regardless of your administrative leadership role. It can quality and apply across all dimensions of leadership roles from executive to managerial to employees.

MLeadership is crucial to any organization from Medicine to Nursing to Hospital to privately owned businesses/corporations. Success generally must have a centralized locus of competent leadership for an organization to flourish. An example of leadership gone amuck is the great “Enron” debacle, Lehman Brothers and Washington Mutual. There are many other examples, too numerous to mention but in all cases leadership of an organization is of primary importance. The gap between effective leadership and incorporating moral behaviors into a business entity is large. The general public, who has been hit hard by greed and fraud, are angry and distrustful of business.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (2011) in their article, The Wise Leader, points out that the severe recession we have experience on a global dimensional plane has placed enormous demands on leadership. The authors point out that Corporate Executive Officers (CEO’s) struggle to retool and cope with the rapid changes in technology, let alone keeping track and ensuring that their work force operates and adheres to ethical standards.

These authors point out the gulf between theory and practice when it comes to ethical behaviors. At this point, they draw on philosophical theories of Plato which is the grounding for western behaviors and conclude with the axiom that if a theory isn’t working there must be something wrong with reality.

It needs to be understood at this juncture, that these theoretical perspectives are better placed into a branch of philosophy called Axiology where there is a clarification of values which puts ethical standards in place by determining what is valued by a society, group, and organizations. After considering the failures of the recent past, the suggestion was noted that natural sciences need not be the only path to leadership but making social sciences a more determinative guide for leaders to consider.

The authors speculate on sole dependence on explicit knowledge, meaning the scientific deductive, theory first approach leading to universal and predictive outcomes. This tends to leave out the social phenomena with leaders making decisions based on economic gains rather than including within this the shared social value.

The authors bring in the idea of practical wisdom which lies in Aristotle’s Nicomachean ethics and his concept of phronesis, that is a “state of true and reasoned capacity which acts in regard to the things that are good or bad for man” (Nonaka I; Takeuchi H. p.3).

Aristotle also identified two types of wisdom; metaphysical and practical wisdom and the authors postulate that this comes from knowledge based on experience. This type of knowledge gives help to the leaders pursuit of a balanced approach of leading by giving service to people as the right course to follow.

The concept of Episteme which again falls into Aristotle sphere implying valid scientific knowledge, where as technique implies skill/technical know-how and phronesis implies what should be done.

The authors then go on to explain the six abilities of phronetic leaders. The first abilities are called, wise leaders can judge goodness. The essence of this first ability revolves around four ways of capturing this ability. These are your own experience of adversity, principles of life experience & the ability to share them; the relentless pursuit of excellence and the leader should be well versed in philosophy, history, and literature plus fine arts helps the executive practice.

The second phonetic ability is wise leaders can grasp the essence. In this paradigm, the wise leader is able to sense what lies behind the situation, develop a vision of the future and/or consequences, and then take action to realize the vision. Practical wisdom allows this to happen through intuitive understanding of the nature and meaning of people, things and events. The exercises that are offered to help this develop is the constant of asking “why” and “what”. The next item is the see the “forest and the trees” together, not as single entities and the third is constructing and testing hypotheses.

The third is wise leaders create shared contexts. This phronetic leader is consistently creating the opportunity for senior executives and employees to work together and learn from each other. This is simple and straight forward with interaction that brings about a shared sense of purpose.

Fourthly, the phronetic leader must demonstrate the ability to communicate in ways where everyone is able to understand. This may entail metaphors, stories and perhaps figurative language which let individuals of differing venues and experiences to grasp things intuitively. Rhetoric may also be used to touch the areas of heart and mind and it is crucial to understand that communication can bring dreams to life. Remember Martin Luther King, Jr’s speech of “I have a dream”.

The fifth ability is wise leaders exercise political power. This is where the phronetic leader spurs people to action and develops this into the single minded pursuit of their goals. Here the leader uses political judgment within the purview of having a critical grasp of viewpoints and emotions of others. Along with this the leader attempts to attain an understanding of the good and bad in human nature. This art of being able to hold two opposing views and at the same time continuing to function at a high level is critical to using political power in a creative and successful way.

The sixth and last ability is wise leaders foster practical wisdom in others.

Here the authors practice the sharing of practical wisdom at all levels and with all employees of the organization. This distributed phronesis lets the organization develop flexibility and creativity within a particular setting and may include part-time workers. Other ways of including practical wisdom is to use exemplars who exhibit leadership qualities which draw people to them. They may inspire average people to perform in extraordinary ways.

In summary, these authors describing a more philosophical approach to capitalism by taking on communitarianism with a philosophical leader who can deal with the changing duality of business at all levels. This ideal leader must be a philosopher, master craftsman, an idealist, a politician, a novelist and a teacher with strong values and principles. They must be able to balance the inductive and deductive precepts to acquire a new vision in an ever changing, rapidly paced world of leadership within the realm of business. This leader will shy away from excess and greed and focus on companies living in harmony with society.

Leadership might be designated as and art as well as a science. The art form of it would include the individual’s perceptive nature, intuition and receptiveness to lead. The science part could include multiple skills and workshops of training based on leadership theories and how to become an excellent administrative leader. However, given the many personalities involved within a leadership milieu, the essence of leadership lends itself to the ethical dimensions that are universal.

Reference

Noaka, I; Takeuchi H. (2011). The Wise Leader. Harvard Business Review May; Vol. 89 (5), PP. 58-67, 146.